THE CHANGES OF LIFE.

A

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

FIRST PARISH IN CAMBRIDGE,

ON THE

SUNDAY AFTER THE DEATH

OF

MRS. HARRIET F. WEBSTER,

OCTOBER 16, 1853.

By WILLIAM NEWELL.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

CAMBRIDGE:
JOHN BARTLETT.
1853.

THE CHANGES OF LIFE.

A

DISCOURSE

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

FIRST PARISH IN CAMBRIDGE,

ON THE

SUNDAY AFTER THE DEATH

OF

MRS. HARRIET F. WEBSTER,

OCTOBER 16, 1853.

By WILLIAM NEWELL.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

CAMBRIDGE:
JOHN BARTLETT.
1853.

"O stay thy tears; for they are blest
Whose days are past, whose toil is done;
Here midnight care disturbs our rest;
Here sorrow dims the noonday sun.

* * * * *

"O stay thy tears; the blest above
Have hailed a spirit's heavenly birth,
And sung a song of joy and love;
Then why should anguish reign on earth?"

A. Norton.

CAMBRIDGE:
METCALF AND COMPANY, PRINTERS TO THE UNIVERSITY.

DISCOURSE.

"ONE GENERATION PASSETH AWAY, AND ANOTHER GENERATION COMETH: BUT THE EARTH ABIDETH FOR EVER. THE SUN ALSO ARISETH, AND THE SUN GOETH DOWN, AND HASTETH TO HIS PLACE WHERE HE AROSE. THE WIND GOETH TOWARD THE SOUTH, AND TURNETH ABOUT UNTO THE NORTH: IT WHIRLETH ABOUT CONTINUALLY: AND THE WIND RETURNETH AGAIN ACCORDING TO HIS CIRCUITS."—Ecclesiastes i. 4–6.

THE world in which we live is a world of continual changes. The face of the earth and the sky, the aspect of society, the condition of individuals, the frame of the body, the feelings of the mind, like the currents of the veering wind, never remain long the same. Through what interesting and beautiful varieties does the year lead us on! A twelvemonth since, and the forests were clothed, as they now are, with their rainbow hues, the leaves were dying and dropping around us, and the husbandman was gathering in the bounties of the harvest. In a few weeks the bracing winds of our Northern winter blew fierce and cold over the dead surface of the fields, the rivers and the lakes were bound fast in their icy chains, and the pure,

white snow threw its radiant mantle over the altered landscape. That too passed away, and mounted in thin mist into the upper sky, or sank into the warmed and loosened earth, to feed the plants and to fill the springs of the coming season. Then, with reluctant steps, the green and flowery Summer gradually assumed her place among the months. The tender herb sprang forth; the hills and the valleys rejoiced in their new glory and verdure; the pastures were clothed with flocks; and the sounds of cheerful labor were heard, mingling with the varied notes of a thousand choristers in field and grove, as they sang their morning hymn to the God of the universe. From week to week, from month to month, we have been witnessing the progressive changes of the vegetable world from the blade to the full ear, from the first sprouting leaf to the grown and ripened plant, from bud to flower, and from flower to fruit, — until Nature has done her annual work, and calls upon man to gather and store her treasures against the wants of the future. And thus we are ever passing through a series of shifting scenes in the earth's yearly circuit through the heavens, all beautiful in their time, all necessary and useful in their design. Then, if we were not so familiar with the spectacle, how striking and delightful would be the vicissitudes of day and night! The glorious sunrise, — the freshness and fragrance of the morning, — the splendors of mid-noon, — the calmer beauties of

evening, — the solemn silence of night, — the darkened firmament, spangled with stars, — meet us with perpetually varied charms. He who has an eye and a soul for this moving gallery of divine art, which the Earth in her unceasing revolution daily exhibits to her children, cannot remain unmoved and unimpressed. Like David, he hears in all a voice declaring the glory of God. Add to these the tides of the ocean, — the changes of the atmosphere, — the ever-varying drapery of the sky, — the alternations of calm and storm, cold and heat, cloud and sunshine, — the phases of the moon and planets, now full-orbed, now crescent, and anon veiled in the shadows of an eclipse, — and the secret, but gradual revolutions that are going on in the deep chambers of the earth itself.

But not to dwell on the scenes of the great universe around us, what a multitude of changes are following one another in the little world of our own existence! Motion, development, progress, is the law of our being. Our bodies and minds never remain fixed at any one point of growth or decay, of strength or weakness. But every year, every month, nay, every moment, — imperceptibly perhaps, but certainly, — affects and modifies our condition. As the plant increases by a secret and gradual, yet constant process, so is it with man, passing slowly, but unceasingly, from stage to stage of his allotted existence. Infancy

and childhood, youth, manhood, and age, indicate the marked periods into which his life is divided, but the subtile gradations by which they steal into each other must pass unnoted by the eye of the observer, and even the consciousness of the individual himself. It is only when we pause and look back on the past, and compare it by a strong effort with the present, that we realize the changes which have taken place in our circumstances and our feelings, merely by the natural course of events. We find that each of the various periods of our lives has its peculiar pleasures and trials, its peculiar anxieties and hopes, its peculiar duties. Thus we are continually carried by the winding stream of life into new situations and new responsibilities. We cannot remain stationary, if we would. God changeth the times and the seasons; and we are changed with them.

But besides the natural changes of body and of mind, through which all must pass in an invariable order on their journey to the grave, there are others which are distributed irregularly among men; which come in a time and manner not to be foreseen or calculated by human wisdom. There is the change, to which all are subject, from health to sickness. No care, no vigilance, can with certainty avert it. The arrow that flieth by day, unseen in the poisoned atmosphere, the pestilence that walketh in darkness, the plague that wasteth at noonday, enter into the

dwellings of rich and poor, young and old; and he who was yesterday rejoicing in health, and exulting in the pride of his strength, is now on the bed of weakness and pain, — a prisoner of the darkened chamber, a helpless dependent on the kindness of his friends, cut off, by sudden accident or disease, from the active enjoyments and the active usefulness of life.

There are changes, too, from which few are exempt, in their worldly circumstances. Our fairest hopes of success are often blasted by calamities over which we have no control. We have seen how, in the sudden thunder-storm of adversity which now and then sweeps over the land, the princely fortune has been reduced to a beggar's portion, and the brightest prospects of the enterprising have been overcast, — perhaps for life. Nor is it only in extraordinary cases that men are liable to the failure of their cherished plans, and to unexpected reverses in their worldly prospects. No skill, no forecast, no activity or determination, can wholly secure them, even in the most auspicious times. But supposing that uninterrupted success crowns their schemes and their labors; that they are enjoying all that comfort can ask or luxury crave; that, more than this, they are happy in their domestic connections, and surrounded with loving children, with true-hearted friends, and dear kindred; — is there not still another change, which overhangs every family, how-

ever united, and every fortune, however secure? — a change which, in many cases, must affect the whole color of one's life. The death of those whom we love, — those who have been bound to us by a thousand tender recollections and common interests, — those whose lives flowed on in the same channel with our own, whose society gave its highest zest to every enjoyment, whose sympathy charmed away our cares, whose affection made even toil a pleasure, and lighted up our way in the perplexities and the gloom of our darker lot, — how many are at this moment passing through the deep shadows of this trial!

Death, however blissful a gain it may be to the friend who is gone, is often a fearful loss to the friends who are left behind. Religion may alleviate, and finally heal, their sorrow, but it cannot immediately overcome it. It may show them the happiness of the dead who have died in the Lord; — it may teach them the heavenly compensations of grief and the loving kindness of Him under whose eye, from whose hand, the affliction comes; — it may light up in their bosoms the star of an inextinguishable hope; — it may enable them to bear up bravely and steadfastly against the shock of their calamity, and to run with patience the race that is set before them, looking unto Jesus; — but it cannot make the dead live again *here*. Let Christian faith and Christian philosophy plead with us as they will, they can but lighten, they cannot

wholly remove, the heaviness of that sorrow which overwhelms the spirit, when the grave closes upon the lovely, the gifted, and the good whose lives were interwoven with our own. The changes which are produced by death, by the removal of kindred and friends, are every day occurring around us, and form a part of the common lot by which God is training his children for a higher home. They are among the most trying of His appointments, and though they may be patiently borne, they must ever be deeply felt by the wisest and truest Christian.

Sometimes they come slowly, as it were with long and merciful delay. We can *see* them coming, and prepare our minds for the inevitable blow. Sometimes they fall upon us with overwhelming suddenness, like the hurricane of the wilderness upon the sons and daughters of Job, and where one day all was joy and hope, the next all is anguish and desolation.

Real life has its pages of wonder and terror as strange and as moving as those of any romance. And so it has been in the instance which has so tenderly touched the sympathies of this community,* before so

---

* Mrs. Harriet F. Webster was a native of St. Michael in the Azores, where her father, Thomas Hickling, Esq., was the American Consul. She was educated in England. Immediately after her marriage with Dr. J. W. Webster, in May, 1818, she sailed with him from St. Michael to this country. The winning beauty of her person and the mingled dignity and sweetness of her manners secured her an admiring welcome in her

strongly awakened by events whose remembrance still haunts us. . . . . One short week changes the whole aspect of life. One short week, — and the household is scattered, and the places that have known them know them no more. . . . . What startling pictures rise up before the mind's eye, as it looks back! What wide and mournful contrasts, sending a shudder through the heart! The dreams of youthful hope and love, and the black realities that at length fell over them like a pall! Bright prospects on every side, and the sad, sad end! The beauty and splendor of the spring-time of life, and the gloom of its faded autumn!

> "Fair laughs the morn, and soft the zephyr blows,
> While, proudly riding o'er the azure realm,
> In gallant trim the gilded vessel goes;
> Youth on the prow, and pleasure at the helm;
> Regardless of the sweeping whirlwind's sway,
> That, hushed in grim repose, expects its evening prey."

But, amidst the outward changes on which we look, there is one thing that does not change, and one on which the memory will ever love to dwell. It is that sweet, gentle, affectionate spirit, which Nature and

---

new home. Her deportment in the afflictions which subsequently darkened her lot was that of a nature as truly heroic as it was truly feminine. She was suddenly taken ill, on Saturday, October 8, and sank away without suffering in the course of thirty-six hours. She died tranquilly, and with mind clear to the last. Her funeral took place on Tuesday, October 11; and on Thursday her daughters sailed for the Azores to join their sisters, who reside at Fayal.

Christ had baptized in love; so meek and lowly, yet, when the trial came, so calm and strong; so tender and disinterested; striving for the sake of its dear ones to look and to be cheerful, while the clinging burden of a great sorrow, weighing upon the heart, was gradually breaking away the elastic springs of life itself. The soft loveliness of countenance and form was the true counterpart and expression of the loveliness within. And the charm that was in both will never be forgotten by those who saw and felt it.

But when we drop these tears over the grave, it is from the tender remembrances of the past, and the springing sympathies that follow the home-wrecked survivors over the ocean wave, and not for her who has so suddenly found the desired rest. There are changes in life infinitely more to be dreaded than the changes occasioned by death. Death, we know, through Christ, is an unspeakable gain to the servants of God; and there may be alleviations connected with it which take away the sharpness of its sting from the living. The memory of the dead may be a continual blessing to them who remain. But there are other changes, from which may God in his infinite mercy spare us, and from which may we, timely warned, spare our friends.

Our present life, then, like the material universe, like the earth and the sky, like the revolving planets, like the waxing and waning moon, is full of motion

and change. It is a mingled web of hopes and disappointments, of pleasures and pains. We are continually passing into some new state of experience within or without. Our circumstances and our feelings are varying their position and their form as perpetually as the waves of the sea, as the clouds of the air.

In what light, then, are we to view the condition of man? Is he a feather on the stream, borne hither and thither, upward and downward, by the eddying current and the wanton wind of Chance? Is he floating adrift — like a vessel without rudder or pilot — on the billowy ocean of life? Is he at the mercy of outward influences over which he has no control? Is he the creature and the sport of a blind destiny? God forbid. There is a spirit in man, and the inspiration of the Almighty hath given him understanding. He has that within him which invests him with a supremacy over the external circumstances of his condition. He can mould them to his own will. He can bend them to the laws of his own character. He can impress upon them the image of his own mind and heart. He can convert them all — whether they be dark or bright — into materials of an eternal good, into nourishment for the immortal soul. Youth, manhood, age, — prosperity and adversity, — health and sickness, — business and festivity, — the society of friends and the pangs of separation, — are only different occasions for the exercise of the soul's ener-

gies. Let those energies bend themselves to their work, and we become the conquerors in this battle-field of life; and the crown which the Lord hath promised to them who love him will be ours.

Now Christianity commands us to put forth the power of the spirit over the outward events of our lot, and to make them all the instruments of our progress towards a higher and higher excellence. It shows us that, amidst the changing scenes of nature and of life, there are three unchangeable objects on which we are to fix our eyes, — God, Virtue, Heaven; and that by these we are to steer our way upward and onward. God, Virtue, Heaven, — these are the watchwords of the Christian pilgrim. Let him bring their full meaning before his mind, and follow out in thought and in life the sublime ideas which they involve, and he is no longer the slave, but the master, of his lot.

Let him centre his thoughts and his hopes in God. Let him look beyond the things that are seen and temporal, to their unseen and eternal Author. That there is a Supreme Intelligence, reigning over the world; — that there is one Almighty Hand, one Benevolent Will, ruling among the hosts of heaven and the inhabitants of the earth, — preserving, guiding, regulating the great whole, — so that from the beginning until now all its complicated operations have been going on in the same tranquil order and

unmarred beauty; — that there is one Infinite and Eternal Being, on whom we and all things depend, whose presence and whose agency are ever and everywhere around us; — this is a truth declared to us with accumulated proof throughout creation. Christianity reveals to us the true character of this Being; — the holiness, justice, benevolence, of his nature; — the tender interest which he takes in our welfare; — his long-suffering and readiness to forgive; — the kind, constant, paternal Providence which he exercises over his creatures. Under the eye of this God we are pursuing our way. Under his care we live, now and for ever. All the changes, then, which we witness, and all the changes through which we pass, — the changes of the universe, the changes of human society, the changes of our own lives, — are of his appointment. They are therefore wise and good, — wisest and best. He is conducting them to some glorious issue, hereafter to be revealed, if not now. Many of them do already testify of the Power and the Providence of their Mighty Author; and the rest, we may be sure, at some future period, when we shall have gained further light upon the works and ways of God, will no less distinctly point to the Eternal and the Immutable Father. Let them turn our thoughts, then, to Him who is guiding them, and in his presence we shall find rest to our souls.

We should consider, in the second place, that, as

there is one Unchanging Being to whom they all point, there is also one unchanging purpose to which, in a religious mind, they all tend, namely, the formation of a pure and exalted character, like that of Christ; the development of spiritual energy; the production of the virtues which adorn and dignify our nature. The various situations in which we are placed by the providence of God are so many various opportunities for the exercise of the best feelings and capacities of the soul. In all this whirling and shifting scene of things, we should be ever pressing on to the one great object of our existence, — the acquisition of Christian goodness. Other blessings may pass away; but this, like the God from whom it emanates, is the same yesterday, to-day, and for ever. It cannot be taken from us by the reverses of fortune, by the art or the tyranny of man, or the power of the grave. Virtue is immortal; it goes with us to the land of spirits; it goes with us to heaven; nay, it makes our heaven, both here and hereafter.

And to that heaven, finally, let the changes of the world direct the heart and the hopes of the Christian believer. When he turns with a sickened soul from the folly, the selfishness, and the corruption of human society, — when he has found himself deceived in those whom he had most fondly trusted, — when he has experienced the emptiness and uncertainty of the worldly gratifications for which men by a sad blindness are

ready to sacrifice and endure so much, — when he looks around him, and sees disappointment, affliction, bereavement, waiting upon the steps of Health and Prosperity, — when he is himself passing through the fiery furnace of trial, — when he is called to surrender his dearest earthly treasures, — when the countenances which once shone brightly upon him are no longer seen, except in memory or in dreams, — when the dearest and the best have vanished one by one from his side, — let him remember that God, Goodness, Heaven, can never pass away. Let him put his trust in that everlasting God. Let him pursue, as the end and aim of his being, that goodness which is life eternal. Let him fix his eyes on that opening heaven, and the changes and trials of his life will be the sanctified means of working out for him a glory and a happiness which shall never end, — thanks be to God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.